BOOK REVIEWS


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“Critical pedagogy” (which might serve as an umbrella term for feminist, Marxist, or cultural studies-based teaching presented as “radical,” “emancipatory,” and “liberatory”) has been maligned on almost innumerable fronts since composition’s turn to more overtly “politicized” instruction in the mid-to-late 1980s. As Joe Marshall Hardin helpfully summarizes, critical pedagogies have been indicted for infantilizing students (by proceeding always from the assumption of their rather incredible “cultural naivete”), for privileging a discriminating but ultimately passive reading/consumption of texts over the writing/production of texts, for losing any transformative potential once they become institutionalized, and, perhaps most saliently, for unabashedly and undemocratically promoting the teacher’s own politics (3-5). And as Susan Welsh elaborates in a recent *College Composition and Communication* essay, critical pedagogies often proceed by “metaphors of battle and disease” that assign “militancy to the educator and pathology to the student,” and that ultimately assign “deficit to difference”—hierarchizing student resistance to dominant culture and then accepting only the most “radical” levels as evidence of effective pedagogical work (556-61).

David L. Wallace and Helen Rothchild Ewald’s 2000 book, *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*, responds to the “failings” of critical pedagogies and offers an alternative model for classroom interaction. The premise that drives this work is that, in addition to the above, critical pedagogies have ultimately failed to alter conventional teacher and student roles and their attendant one-way model of communication. “In short,” Wallace and Ewald write, “the impetus to empower students through liberatory and emancipatory pedagogies” has not been “enough”; teacher and student roles remain “in need of change in today’s classrooms” (2-3). Thus, *Mutuality* returns us to teaching’s original scene (sin?), to the classroom, and to the fundamentals of teacher/student interchange. In that process, the book provides a deeply revealing and provocative look at pedagogy in action.
The key to our much needed change, then (as the book’s title might predict), is the ever elusive concept of “mutuality,” which Wallace and Ewald define as “teachers and students sharing the potential to adopt a range of subject positions and to establish reciprocal discourse relations as they negotiate meaning in the classroom.” Mutuality, in other words, is the corner-stone concept of a pedagogy that “rejects the idea that the teacher’s main role is to convey a received body of knowledge,” and instead “invites students to take subject positions as co-constructors” of classroom meaning (2-4). This ideal, of course, may strike compositionists as something we have been talking about and striving toward (at least) since we were debunking the “banking concept” of education with Paulo Freire in the 1980s; however, while Wallace and Ewald draw on Freire, the pedagogy detailed in *Mutuality* is more accurately and explicitly framed by John Dewey’s earlier twentieth-century principles of education, as its goals are decidedly *liberal* rather than *liberatory*: Wallace and Ewald emphatically stress that resistance to dominant discourses is neither the “only option open to students,” nor the desired end result of their pedagogy. In order for mutuality to exist, in fact, students must be “allowed to decline invitations to critical consciousness,” and teachers must both accept and “support students’ attempts to represent positions that run contrary” to “liberatory goals” (5, 21). In this desired space of mutuality, students “might employ strategies that could be considered oppressive,” the authors frankly admit, and “there is no guarantee that they will allow each other to speak freely” (25). Moreover, any epistemological shifts or “transformation” students might undergo as a result of their composition course can not “be designated in advance”: Transformations must develop organically from classroom interaction, not as a result of a teacher’s pre-conceived political agenda (4-6). In sum, this is a pedagogy that “takes seriously Maxine Hairston’s concern,” articulated in 1992 and alluded to above, that “ideological pedagogy” can become repressive and silencing in its own right (138).

In Chapter One, the authors articulate the foregoing, formative principles of the book and their pedagogy, and set forth the three specific means by which we can achieve mutuality in the classroom—means which are both elaborated and exemplified in the next three chapters. First, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, Wallace and Ewald stress that teachers must work to reconstitute the specific sets of discursive practices, or “speech genres,” of the classroom, rejecting “teacher centered default” patterns and striving for true “parity in discourse relations” with students (6, 10-11). Second, and relatedly, teachers must redesign “course
architecture” so that assignments, activities, and the general daily functioning of the class also lead to and reflect a parity of power relations. Students must have considerable freedom to direct and redirect classroom discussions, invent and alter course assignments, and contribute to their own and their peers’ evaluations (11-15). Finally, teachers must (re)value what Wallace and Ewald call students’ “interpretive agency,” lending credence to students’ “unique perspective[s],” expecting and, indeed, asking that students draw from “prior experience” as they contribute to the knowledge made within and by the class (16).

Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom, is, as Wallace and Ewald note in the book’s preface, based on “seven year journey in which [they] put moments from [their] teaching under a microscope,” and, specifically, on case studies of two very different classrooms—Wallace’s entry-level college writing course, and Ewald’s graduate seminar in communication theory. In Chapters Two through Four of the book, we go under the microscope with Wallace and Ewald, as it were, peeking in at their exhaustive and uncompromising accounts of pedagogies of mutuality enacted within these two distinct contexts. (The accounts of the graduate seminar are perhaps a particularly unusual and welcome addition to composition’s pedagogical literature, as graduate education in rhetoric and composition continues to thrive and expand.) Organized around the three previously mentioned means of affecting mutuality, these chapters render abundant excerpts of classroom dialogue, as well as illuminating metacommentary from both student interviews and from the teachers themselves, who reflect upon what they might have done better, differently, or not at all. The detail of the excerpts and commentary is certainly one of the book’s greatest strengths—providing as it does both models of self-reflexive practitioners at work and rich material for future or current teachers’ discussion and self-interrogation.

Particularly rich is the scenario which becomes the focal point of Chapter Four, and, really, the crux of the book. Subtitled, “Or, Should David Have Told His Story,” this key chapter features Wallace responding to a class discussion on affirmative action with a “personal story” of his own: his account of his MLA job search during a year when, purportedly, “two women dominated the limited market for composition and rhetoric jobs.” Wallace asserts to his first-year writing students that these two women “screened people out of the market,” and that, while he “still got a job, . . . one of [his] classmates who [was also] a white male” did not. Though Wallace acknowledges that his classmate had fewer publications than did some candidates and may not have interviewed “quite as well,” he
nonetheless holds affirmative action “absolutely” responsible for excluding potentially qualified white men from ideal rhetoric and composition jobs, at least during this apparently fateful year (105-06).

As the chapter’s subtitle indicates, Wallace’s contribution to this classroom interchange is hardly left unexamined; it becomes the subject of multiple student interviews, and of Wallace’s own self-interrogation, and, at times, self-flagellation. However, while both students and Wallace himself are critical of what might have been a lapse in pedagogical judgement, the primary causes of critique, self- or otherwise, seem to be that Wallace’s narration placed him in “a different role than usual” (116), one where he perhaps took too much control of classroom discourse, and that, ultimately, it also played a role in dissuading a male African American student from writing about affirmative action at all (126). While these are important localized concerns, there is little to no mention given to the fact, and the danger, of Wallace’s reinscription here of a burgeoning white male “victimization narrative” that many fear threatens to erode any minimal gains made by “multiculturalism” throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As Peter McLaren, Zeus Leonard, and Ricky Lee Allen write in “Epistemologies of Whiteness: Transgressing and Transforming Pedagogical Knowledge,” white males’ “desperate fear of losing control of moral, economic, and cultural space” has already translated into a zealous and, in many cases, successful “agenda of recolonizing” what is perceived as their “lost historical horizon.” The increasingly common anti-affirmative action stance among white men and, indeed, the recent passage of anti-affirmative action propositions in California, attest both to this fear and to its tremendous cultural power (108-09, 112).

Although Wallace’s response is dangerous, there are many ways in which it is completely in line with the ideological perspective that frames this book and the pedagogy it advocates. As Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy explain in a similarly themed College Composition and Communication essay, “Teaching for Student Change,” at the heart of Deweyan, and, many would argue, American, liberalism is a respect for the “integrity” of each person’s (classroom) offerings, regardless of potentially oppressive content, and, even more fundamentally, a celebration of the absolute freedom of each individual to “think for him or herself” and articulate those views (347). In the end, Wallace and Ewald find it at least partially commendable that Wallace spoke freely, situating himself as a person with his own ideological baggage and beliefs, and thereby disrupting traditional classroom speech genres that would instead hold the teacher to an impossible standard of neutrality (130).
Ultimately, this is the foregrounded, crucial, and redemptive lesson of the affirmative action encounter for everyone involved, including readers: as teachers we must examine and take responsibility for our own subject positions. It is “difficult for teachers to accept the fact that their [raced/gendered] subjectivities are involved in their responses,” the authors warn, “because this view runs contrary to the traditional understanding of a teacher as someone who remains above the fray” (110). Wallace and Ewald go on to make explicit calls for greater willingness on the part of teachers to “acknowledge and account for” the ways in which our “cultural identities” affect our students and shape our own classroom behavior (113, 145). Yet despite these judicious, even indispensable calls for reflection and action, the book at times continues to manifest the very same blindness to teacher difference that it would disrupt, and especially with regard to the concept of mutuality itself.

Mutuality, in other words, is advocated as both a potentially effective approach to and product of pedagogy for virtually all teachers at all levels of education. The authors do caution that there are certain dangers to mutuality, warning, for example, that as “the dominant view of education in our country is implicitly hostile to teachers’ attempts to share authority with students,” teachers using “alternative approaches” may “place themselves at risk in terms of how they are evaluated.” Teachers working in primary and secondary schools may be especially vulnerable, Wallace and Ewald suggest, as their pedagogical performance is often “assessed in terms of students’ standardized test scores” and little else (25). Yet, while these are, again, important concerns, there is no mention of the impact raced, gendered, and other differences—the very differences Wallace and Ewald would ostensibly like us to bear in mind—may have on the ability to enact mutuality in the first place (25). It is here that Homa Hoodfar’s essay from the 1997 collection, Radical In<ter>ventions: Identity, Politics, and Difference/s in Educational Praxis, may help to illuminate some other, pressing concerns. Hoodfar’s pedagogical account may help to illuminate the risks that inevitably haunt one-size-fits-all pedagogical models: After experimenting with a variety of teaching strategies along a spectrum of student to teacher-centered, Hoodfar—who is Muslim, Iranian, and an immigrant to the U.S.—found that the more “dialogic” and student-centered her pedagogy, the more students questioned her ability and knowledge. “In making room for dialogue,” Hoodfar explains, “I am not taken as a liberal teacher experimenting with . . . different pedagogy, but as someone lacking experience in controlling a class, or worse yet as someone too lazy to deliver more conventional
lectures” (221). Obviously and destructively framed by racialized and gendered stereotypes, Hoodfar’s invitations to mutuality, then, are received only as her “not being confident as a teacher, or as compensation for [her] lack of knowledge” (221). Even more importantly, perhaps, deviations from a “teacher-centered default” pattern resulted for Hoodfar in an over-determined focus on her own teaching style that she felt precluded students’ engagement with issues actually raised by the course. Hoodfar thus determines that she can get the focus off of herself and mobilize more rigorous student thinking by “monopolizing the conventional language and authority of a teacher.” It is then, she writes, that students begin to “ask questions to clarify the issues involved” (224), then that they become constructors of meaning in the classroom.

From within composition studies, Cheryl Johnson (whom Wallace and Ewald cite) and Shirley Wilson Logan have described similar rejections of their teaching and similar difficulties engaging students when occupying the traditionally white and male teacher-space as female and “brown drenched signifier[s] of difference” (Johnson 132). Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom, however, finally remains detached from these critical and situated pedagogical discussions that take teacher difference more explicitly into account, as well as from some of the larger socio-political constraints upon and ramifications of classroom work. Moreover, and perhaps relatedly, like Hairston’s work before it, and indeed like all critiques of “ideological” pedagogies, this book perhaps under-examines the assumptions of traditional liberalism that warrant its claims. Nonetheless, as a mentor of first-year graduate T.A.s, I would definitely use this book in our teaching seminar—as much for its oversights as for its insights. Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom is an unfailingly honest, revealing, and, frankly, brave look at teachers in process and in progress. It is a look at teachers teaching and thinking about their teaching; a look at attempts. I believe that this book will serve as a provocative resource for future and current teachers as they invent and adjust teaching philosophies and praxis. In fact, a quick web search reveals that it is already instigating such work—generating prolific listserv discussion in both graduate and undergraduate teacher training courses.

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The first sentence of the preface identifies the intended audience of this book as pre-service teachers, credentialed instructors, and other readers interested in the structure and functions of English. Thus this text is an obvious candidate for use in courses devoted to the explicit teaching of grammar or in language arts pedagogy classes. Yet Williams’ text is also a useful resource for college writing instructors. The Teacher’s Grammar Book offers provocative insights into such issues as error, the causes of writer’s block, resistance to Standard English, and the influences of popular culture upon the reading and writing abilities of contemporary students. Though the chapters feature numerous exercises, this text does not replace the grammar/usage handbooks that already abound. The reader will not find lists of irregular verb forms or instructions for punctuating dialogue. Instead, Williams’ book historicizes the prevailing approaches to grammar instruction—traditional (prescriptive), phrase-structure, transformational-generative, and cognitive—and demonstrates how the fundamental assumptions of each are realized in grammatical